

Lesley University

DigitalCommons@Lesley

Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses

Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences
(GSASS)

Summer 8-31-2023

Unified Co-Op Art: Empowerment and Collaboration through Group Art Therapy and a Community Engagement Art Show

Gianna Krovocheck
gkrovoch@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses

Recommended Citation

Krovocheck, Gianna, "Unified Co-Op Art: Empowerment and Collaboration through Group Art Therapy and a Community Engagement Art Show" (2023). *Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses*. 765.
https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses/765

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.

**Unified Co-Op Art: Empowerment and Collaboration through Group Art Therapy and a
Community Engagement Art Show**

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

08/03/2023

Gianna Krovocheck

Clinical Mental Health Counseling with specialization in Art Therapy

Dr. Lee Ann Thill

Abstract

This community engagement thesis examines the use of group art therapy to encourage empowerment, collaboration, and peer relations with students in grades 6-12, with and without intellectual disabilities, including autism spectrum disorders (ASD). A literature review was done, examining current theories on empowerment, school-based art therapy, inclusion, and display of art, thus aiding in the formulation of the group purpose. After the 6-week program, completed artwork was showcased in a community wide art show at a local candy store that employs individuals with intellectual disabilities. Using group art therapy and community engagement, participants were able to create relationships, practice social skills, increase confidence and encourage both participants and the community to include and interact with one another.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Intellectual disabilities, Empowerment, Collaborative, Group art therapy, Social skills, Confidence

The author identifies as a cisgender, straight, White woman from New England of mixed European ancestry.

Unified Co-Op Art: Empowerment and Collaboration through an Inclusion Based Art Therapy Group and a Community Engagement Art Show

Introduction

In the Unified Co-Op Art group, participants with and without intellectual, physical, and emotional disabilities work alongside one another to create art, all the while fostering a safe environment for creativity. This is an art group of teenage students with and without disabilities working alongside one another to create a sense of community for a 6-week period. At the end of the sixth week, an art show took place to invite the community to witness the work that was made and the abilities of all the participants. The use of art therapy allowed for the teaching of coping and social skills, as well gives a new form of expression. A more tangible mode of expression can allow for participants to feel safer and more comfortable in sharing with others. In studies, this new mode of expression allowed for participants to communicate easier, while also advocating for themselves and showing greater self-confidence (Schweizer et al. 2020), a goal of this inclusive art group. Unified Co-op Art was conceived with the notion of inclusion, collaboration, and empowerment.

In general, extracurricular activities are important for adolescents and teens. They are “essential for developing friendships, increasing the likelihood of community integration and postschool success, and improving the overall quality of life” (Kleinert et al., 2007, p. 33). The utilization of extracurricular activities allows for those participating to have new experiences, encourage social interaction and peer relations, and create a community within their activity. Students with intellectual disabilities need “meaningful opportunities and explicit instruction so that they can develop the critical skills needed for participating in school and community recreation activities” (Kleinert et. al., 2007, p. 33). Unified Co-Op Art introduced these students

to a controlled extracurricular environment that aims to encourage meaningful interactions with a common goal to gain exposure and practice with peer interactions.

Burdick & Causton-Theoharis (2012) wrote, “picture if you will, an inclusive art classroom where paraprofessionals and art educators work together to allow for the most autonomous and free artistic expression from all of your students in the inclusive art classroom” (p. 37). Unified Co-Op Art strived to create this inclusive art space where participants naturally engaged with peers and created social relationships while exploring their identities through collaborative and individual art prompts. The program ended with a community engagement art show entitled, “A Touch of Sweetness” where participants displayed their work, interacted with those attending the event, and had the opportunity for others to view their art. It also provided an opportunity for them to invite family and friends and further their sense of community, accomplishment, and pride.

This paper is comprised of multiple sections. These sections include the literature review, methods, results and discussion, all exemplifying the importance and benefits of an inclusive, collaborative art group and a community engagement art show.

Literature Review

During adolescence, individuals start to form their identities. Identity includes personal beliefs, values, motivation, and social roles (Beaumont, 2012). An aspect critical to developing a healthy and meaningful self and social identity is a “use of social cognitive processing... characterized by self-exploration, self-reflection, and a balanced use of assimilation and accommodation processes that creates integrated self-knowledge along with a high level of commitment to oneself constructed identity” (Beaumont, 2012, p. 7). During early or middle adolescence, individuals may begin searching for their identity and role in society within the social context of their world. Self-exploration is a major aspect of this search. This identity

exploration is a normal developmental task leading to the emergence of individuality in adolescence into adulthood. An understanding of identity is vital to figuring out roles in the community.

When difficulties arise out of this identity exploration, individuals have been shown to have low self-reflection, low self-esteem, and higher neuroticism. They also tend to continuously use self-sabotaging, avoidant coping and decision-making strategies (Beaumont, 2012). Processes needed to develop identity can be difficult to understand and conceptualize, especially in individuals with intellectual disabilities. Interactions with peers and social relationships help individuals explore their identities. A lack of stimulating interactions and separation in schools, as is common with disabled students, creates a barrier to developing a sense of individual and group identity.

The American Psychological Association (APA) (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defined autism spectrum disorders (ASD) as persistent deficits in social communication and social-emotional reciprocity. Nonverbal behaviors and communication occur, including idiosyncrasies in body language and lack of understanding and use of gestures. Some other common symptoms of ASD include repetitive motor movements and speech. Inconsistencies in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships are also common. Individuals can show repetitive or fixed patterns of behavior and interests, which can include insistence on sameness, being uncompromising, and adherence to routines or rituals (Alter-Muri, 2017, p.20).

Due to the tendency for autistic individuals to be concrete and literal, it is a greater challenge for them to “adjust to more abstract forms of self-explorations” (Henley, 2000 p. 272). Allowing these individuals to work with peers and interact socially allows for an introduction to a “creative use of slang, euphemisms, even vulgarity, all [that] may enliven one’s speech”

allowing for individuals to connect and understand peers from their culture/environment (Henley, 2000, p. 272). Having an environment in which autistic individuals can interact with their peers without autism, allowing for these conversations and experiences to occur and encourages peer interactions that may have once been hindered.

When interacting with students with disabilities, peers without disabilities have varying levels of comfort (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005). One possible reason for this is the separation of students with intellectual disabilities into different classes from their peers. In addition, the presence of a supporting adult, a paraprofessional, makes it more likely other peers will avoid the student with the disability (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005). Factors like separation and adult aids allow individuals with disabilities to be easily identified as having special needs or a disability. Researchers have found, “exclusion occurs disproportionately in certain groups, including children with special educational needs” (McDonald & Holttum, 2020, p. 120). Another possible reason for this exclusion is persistent, disruptive behavior which can be a characteristic of autism and individuals receiving special educational accommodations.

Social and communication deficits associated with autism can interfere with the social identity process and make it difficult for autistic individuals to develop a sense of their self and social identities (Cooper et al., 2017). Henley (2000) identified peer rejection as a common presenting issue for individuals with ADHD and ASD. Their impulsive and sometimes inappropriate social interactions may result in confused, angry and resentful feelings from peers, contributing to the realization of a necessity for a safe place for these vital interactions.

Mental health problems like anxiety and depression are more common in individuals with ASD and other intellectual disorders, with a 50% lifetime rate of both mood disorders and anxiety within this population. These comorbid disorders also have been associated with lower self-esteem (Cooper, Smith & Russell, 2011). Individuals with ASD and other intellectual

disorders can have a higher comorbidity rate of mood disorders, anxiety, and depression because of their lack of relations, and difficulty expressing and verbalizing emotions, thoughts, and feelings. Using art therapy can help with the comorbidity and allows these individuals to get the resources needed.

Art uses an alternative mode of communication, one that allows comfortability is sharing and expressing. Participants can reflect on, express, and integrate their individual identity characteristics including their “developments, abilities, personalities, passions, ideas, conscience, and inner emotions in the artwork process using art materials” (Huang et. al., 2021 p. 77). This artistic expression allows individuals to create a better self-understanding while also improving social skills. The act of creating art enables individuals to express their emotions, allowing facilitators and therapists to observe reactions that can enhance self-acceptance and encourage social interactions.

Art therapy offers a mode of expression for individuals having practical language skills difficulties. Art utilizes a non-verbal mode of communication that can allow individuals to share aspects, like emotions and experiences, that were once not shared before (Moula et. al., 2022). Even without verbal communication, individuals can still experience companionship and a sense of belonging through observations and feelings (Huang et. al., 2021). Within a group setting, individual projects allow group members to be aware of other participants and let everyone engage in the parallel process, allowing accompaniment on each other’s journeys through the artmaking. Group interactions will then start to naturally occur. An emotional and intellectual integration of personal experiences can take place because of the viewing and reflection on the art that has been expressed through their creativity (Epp, 2008). Art allows the viewer and even the artist themselves to gain insight into the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the artist, which may not readily be available through verbal means. The visual and concrete characteristics

of art allow individuals who often experience anxiety, in social situations, to relax and enjoy creating art while learning and practicing necessary skills in a more controlled and safe environment (Epp, 2008). Utilizing art allows for a “full sensory immersion and interaction of verbal, visual and tactile modalities” (Elkis-Abuhoff, 2008, p. 269). Visual art allows participants to fully communicate and express themselves for themselves, the group, and the wider community.

The use of art also encourages a “development of patience, active listening and the gradual control over the behavioral reactions that arise from uncomfortable situations” (Moula et.al., 2022, p. 10). Participation in art activities can reduce stress hormones through calming activities (Holttum, 2020). Hartman (2020) pointed out that using art therapy is an avenue for a visual expression of stories and creation of narratives that can help in the journey of self-discovery. Artmaking can also increase the emotional and oral communication power of a student’s inner and outer worlds (Alter-Muri, 2017). Art helps individuals with disabilities create relationships and practice social skills that may be difficult due to their diagnosis. For individuals without disabilities, the same takes place, despite the preconceived notions that may present about those with disabilities.

Group art therapy has been shown to be effective for autistic individuals through improving social skills because of the channel for emotional expression and release that art provides (Huang et.al. 2021). The multidimensional experiences through art resulted in adolescents improved social interactions and positive feelings (Huang et.al. 2021). The practice of art therapy and group art therapy in schools helps reduce stigma and aids in the increase in inclusivity. It also creates access to a wide network of supports including, peers, teachers, outsiders servicers, parents, and guardians (Moula et.al., 2022). Art therapy builds a bridge for

individuals to readily communicate with their peers, something that can be difficult to do with verbal communication.

Art can be considered an essential third object that can be a point of dialogue that allows for expression and new interpretations (Potash, Ho & Ho, 2018). Artistic storytelling enables compassion from the viewer. Art allows for a new creation that can help facilitate dialogue, experimentation, and community building. Viewing art enables curiosity about the artist and viewer's world. Art also encourages opportunities for reflection by the viewer as an audience member, empowering the creators (Potash, Ho & Ho, 2018). McNiff (2011) stated, "art making can function as a systemic inquiry that uses creative expression as a way of knowing, communicating and furthering personal and social development" (p. 387).

Using art honors the difficult experiences, encouraging participants to "live courageously" (Moon, 2016 p. 128) in the presence of such difficulties, especially in the presence of others and sharing one's work. Creating art gives new opportunities for experiences and training of new skills for those with communication problems. Using art materials offers tactile and sensory motor experiences that can contribute to new behavior (Schweizer et. al., 2020). Using art can open a participant up to exploring and developing preferences and new skills to perceive one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Schweizer et. al., 2020). Using the arts has been used in expressing emotions which can be complex and not easily verbalized by all. Using art enables non-verbal communication that is crucial in adolescents' mental health and well-being.

Moon (2016) discussed art as empowerment stating, "to empower means to give authority to, or legal power to, or to enable. Making art with others empowers" (p. 128). Participants can claim authority to express themselves in a safe environment. Through creation, authority is taken and accepted. This "creative empowerment provides members with a process

of transformation from the position of victims to that of survivors” (Moon, 2016, p. 127).

Creating art alongside others encourages participants to express parts of themselves that may be unpleasant, in a gratifying way (Moon, 2016). Art making can be an additional means of communication, and allows for sharing among group members, which encourages an environment of friendship and acceptance (Delucia, 2016). This creative mode of expression alongside others allows for group members to claim and accept their own power while encouraging them to use it to empower themselves (Moon, 2016). The artists have autonomy over and can express their unique feelings and journey. Participants within the Co-Op art program, learned to do this alongside others ‘traveling’ together within the art studio, while they also create a “therapeutic community” (Moon, 2016 p. 95) and reduce isolation (p. 87). Moon (2016) pointed out that art does not completely erase conflict, instead it uses the tension from it to empower creativity. Participants within an art group can then be allowed to discover, create meanings, and express themselves while they explore and “honor painful disharmonies” (Moon, 2016, p. 132). that may be present.

In using a symbolic representation of self, art therapy allows for transformation and construction of a true self-concept, insight, and the skills to build a more flexible and adaptive self-identity. This ability to adapt and understand other identities strengthens social interaction and builds relationships with others. Moon, as cited by Beaumont (2012), “making art is first and foremost a natural way to experience self-exploration, self-expression, and self-revelation” (p. 8). Art making can express the symbolic aspects of oneself (Beaumont, 2012), and then within a group setting to understand and interact with others.

In bringing special education and art together, an inclusive model must be created and maintained within a positive environment for those with and without disabilities. Guay (1995) described inclusion as the:

commitment to educate each child to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend. It involves bringing support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child benefit from being in the class (rather than having to keep up with the other students) (p. 52).

Students with disabilities have limited opportunities to choose activities that they enjoy, value and are interested in, an essential part of identity. This limitation could be due to lack of opportunities, communication, and social skill deficits that are associated with certain disabilities or even a lack of knowledge as to what is available (Burdick & Causton-Theoharis, 2012). It may also be due to the separation of disabled students from their peers, or the stigmatization that may be apparent within the school environment (Burdick & Causton-Theoharis, 2012).

The environment, group structure and inclusion all contribute to the creation of a sense of safety that an inclusive art group needs to succeed, and which allows for participants to feel comfortable to express and empower themselves. According to Van der Kolk (2014) feeling safe while working along others is a vital aspect of mental health. It can allow individuals to heal, and grow.

Through the art making process and the product created, there is a reduction in problematic behavior and support for individuals to address and accept their 'problems' (Schweizer et. al., 2020). Using art therapy has been shown to help with difficulties adolescents with intellectual disabilities experience in their everyday life, including anxiety, social interaction, and behavior. Four main problem areas of ASD that can be addressed in art therapy include sense of self, emotional regulation, flexibility, and social communication problems (Schweizer, et. al., 2020). Studies have shown an improvement in peer relations, social interactions and focus utilizing art therapy among the ASD and related disorders community (Schweizer, et. al., 2020).

Art therapy can help create a bigger picture, allowing for the visualization of experiences and expression of inner thoughts and emotions, and allowing the artist to be seen as part of the whole. The process permits information to be integrated, allowing for the identification of patterns that in turn lead to “associations, generalization, and possibilities” (Elkis-Abuhuff, 2008, p. 263). With an emphasis on visual characteristics, the work can be seen as an education of emotions for the viewer and creator. The goal in using arts and verbal interventions, is to create and build new, ‘useful’ and ‘acceptable’ behaviors that can then be reinforced and integrated to encourage learning and behavioral change (Elkis-Abuhuff, 2008).

Epp (2008) described that art therapy is especially appropriate for individuals on the autism spectrum because “they are often visual, concrete thinkers” (p. 30). Art allows, in a nonthreatening way, visual problem solving, which creates a less literal and more concrete way of self-expression. It also encourages a more acceptable mode to express aggression and encourages self-soothing practices. The goal is to have “unconscious images emerge and be contained, which serves as a tool to process otherwise hidden thoughts and feelings” (Alter-Muri, 2017 p. 21). Art has also been shown to improve “abstract thinking skills, and non-verbal and verbal communication for students diagnosed with ASD” (Alter-Muri, 2017, p. 21). Utilizing art therapy in a group setting for individuals with intellectual disabilities aids in improving social skills in such a way that it can be generalized into many other environments. Group art therapy helps individuals to form friendships by utilizing these social skills and practicing them in a controlled group (Epp, 2008).

Not only does art therapy allow for the exploration of self-identification, it also can aid in the exploration of one’s social identification or their “feeling of psychological connection to the group, such that it is internalized within the individual’s sense of self” (Cooper, et.al., 2017 p. 845). Not only does this social identification and group membership help with a feeling of

connectedness to one's group, but it improves physical and psychological well-being (Cooper, et.al., 2017). In 'typical' developing individuals, social identities form from validating and consensual interactions. This enhances the attachment between individuals and increases the ability to provide social support to others and promote a sense of "collective self-esteem" (Cooper et. al., 2017 p. 852). With autistic individuals and people with other intellectual disabilities, there is impact on an individual's social functioning. The deficits in "social communication and restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviors interests and activities" call for an alternative mode of communication, art, which helps to foster and nurture appropriate and social interactions, which enhances and expands a groups cohesiveness (Cooper et. al., 2017, p. 845). By using art, the ability of working with partners is eased, allowing for a greater ability and benefits of group work. Group work allows for an introduction to others and for the ability to practice socializing, developing relationships and interacting with peers. It also encourages a greater ability to compromise, and greater confidence around peers, an ability to work with different individuals, and more flexibility (McDonald & Holttum, 2020).

Research has shown that those who belong to more groups have greater opportunities to give and accept help, utilizing their networks of social support and increasing their well-being (Cooper et. al., 2017). Belonging to a group and the practice that comes with it can be seen as a "steppingstone to assist their integration into the community, as a place of respite and relief from mental or emotional pressure, to make friends and reduce isolation, or as an impetus to learn new things and gain artistic skills" (Chamberlain, 2020, p. 67). Through "teaching social and communication skills to [individuals, it allows] them the ability and opportunity to fulfill their need for friendship and companionship" (Epp, 2008, p. 28). Individuals, even at adolescence "are taught by means of role modeling and modeling two-way interactions" (Epp, 2008, p. 28), giving a clear explanation as to why working with peers is so important.

In discussing ideas such as individuals with disabilities, inclusion, and community engagement practices, multiple theories and ideas were considered and utilized to help promote such topics. These included narrative therapy, person-centered approach, social empowerment theory and the social identity approach. Narrative therapy is centered on stories that individuals share about themselves, their lives, and can also include what others say about them (Meekums, 2005). It is based on the idea that we continually construct and reconstruct our life story, and that “stories as metaphors convey aspects and create new constructions of the self in relation” (Meekums, 2005, p. 96). Using narrative techniques allows for individuals to be able to separate themselves from their emotional problems, and construct and build different mindsets by using different perspectives to tell stories (Beaumont, 2012), which allows individuals to look empathetically at peers, enabling social interactions to occur more easily.

The goal of person-centered therapy is for the individual to become more “autonomous, spontaneous and confident” (Elkis-Abuhuff, 2008, p. 5), all while utilizing empathic listening within a safe space for the client to feel completely and deeply understood (Elkis-Abuhuff, 2008).

Social empowerment art therapy can be seen as “a participatory, collaborative process that emphasizes art making as vehicle by which communities name and understand their realities, identify their needs and strengths, and transform their lives in ways that contribute to individual and collective well-being and justice” (Morris & Willis-Rauch, 2014, p. 30). According to this theory, the artwork and the artists community, society and culture are inseparable. They all work together and allow for stories to be shared and heard through many different avenues. The engagement of both social empowerment and art therapy together, gives emphasis on an individual’s role in one’s own rehabilitation and development, while using an open studio approach, giving more autonomy over the studio space and decision making. The artwork

becomes something that the artists and the communities can start to understand their roles, realities and construct and communicate their identities through (Morris & Willis-Rauch, 2014). The social action art therapy gives individuals the social power with their created art that can then become a platform for communication (Morris & Willis-Rauch, 2014).

Within the social identity approach, the individual is seen as part of the community, as part of the whole. Cooper et. al (2017) proposed the use of social identity approach as a helpful theoretical framework to consider ones identify, including neurodiverse identity (Cooper et. al, 2017). According to this theory, one's self concept consists of personal characteristics but also shared characteristics with various populations and groups in which they belong to. (Cooper et. al., 2017).

Methods

Within Unified Co-Op Art, peers, adults, facilitators, volunteers, and cooperative strategies all played a major role in normalizing the environment for students with disabilities, mirroring an inclusive classroom. The group was made up of seven individuals with varying levels of disabilities and six individuals who were 'buddies,' or individuals who participated in the art making practice while also helping their peers. The participants worked collaboratively with one another, creating artwork, helping, and teaching one another, while sharing their stories for the duration of the program.

In the Unified Co-Op Art group, I served as the lead facilitator, with an assistant facilitator to be available to participants when needed. The assistant facilitator was chosen based on availability, as well as previous experience working with this population. The assistant facilitator was recruited by me because of their artistic knowledge, previous work, and previous experience as a unified sports coach.

As facilitator, I encouraged all involved to work in collaboration with the artists to create a creative and accepting 'unified' community, while promoting and aiding the artists in any way that was needed. I made sure to lessen the hierarchical roles that are typical in the more familiar teacher student relationships by holding an inclusive space allowing the program to thrive. There was a natural progression of the facilitator becoming more of a witness, giving autonomy to the group. As the group continued, the participants became facilitators themselves, and created a self-maintaining group collaborative process

This program took place in the school districts high school art room. The location of the group was decided based on factors such as availability, location, accessibility, size, and practicality. There was also ample space for those instances where parents wanted to remain during the group activity. The room was also set up to provide support and encourage attendees to advocate for their needs. The group took place on Thursday evenings at 6 pm to 7 pm. The time and date were decided based on the other unified programs that were available since they had already started and many of the artists also participated in unified sports.

Each art session was an hour long, consisting of a 10-minute warm up and set up, 40-minute art making time, and a 10-minute closing and clean up time. The six weeks of art making group was used to prepare pieces that would be displayed at the community engagement art show.

Four large rectangular tables were pushed together to provide a common area to create art alongside one another, and so that each participant could interact with one another. Materials being used each day were laid out on the tables for the participants to choose from. These materials also encouraged exploration of new tools. Extra paper was always provided for practice and experimentation.

Instrumental music was played softly throughout the duration of the art making time. When the music was shut off it provided a prompt for times when announcements were made or when it was time for the group to clean up

In addition to individual projects, collaborative projects were used to encourage group cohesiveness, collaboration, group identity formation and practice social skills. The participants were encouraged to ask their peers questions before asking the facilitator.

Minimal instruction was given to make more time for self-experimentation and group collaboration. Instruction and art making time were distinguished and identified, allowing for self-control and emotional and behavioral regulation. Prompts and materials were provided and suggested for use, but the participants were autonomous in their experience and were able to create artwork that felt appropriate to them and explored the themes discussed within the group. Questions about the artwork were posed so that the artists could reflect on what they made. Projects were chosen, based on research participants' abilities and the evolution of the community relationships throughout the group. Projects included an about me collage, an artist round robin mural, drawing to music, collaborative painting, building our hive, and the "Sweetness Project" (see Appendix A)

After the six-week group, an art show took place that introduced the community to Unified Co-Op Art, the purpose of it, as well as the stories and artwork of the participants. This art show aimed to instill a sense of cohesion for individuals in diverse communities. Planning the community engagement art show took place with collaboration from the school district, parents of artists and volunteers, as well as the Aaron Zenus Foundation who runs the candy store in which the art show took place. These collaborations were crucial in planning and setting a date for the community engagement art show as well as advertising the show so that it was widely attended.

Two weeks prior to the art show, each participant was given invitations to hand out to people that they would like to invite. In planning the time and date of the show, discussions with parents and the schools took place so that all the artists could attend. The art show was 2-hour open house style event.

The art show was set up in a circular formation to create a flow throughout the store and to minimize groups of people blocking the artwork. Project write ups were displayed to give patrons background information, and each work of art was labeled with the artist's name. Artists interacted with the community members who came to bear witness to the work of the group.

To continue to monitor and process the evolution of the group, as the facilitator and witness to the process, I journaled after each of the art group sessions. The journaling was done on topics such as summaries of what took place that session, important interactions among group members, group members shared opinions on topics, the success of the projects and any other observations made. The main role of the journal was to have concrete evidence to look back on to see the similarities between the research used to create the group, and to continue to grow and adapt the sessions so they can continue to be successful. Facilitators must have belief in others' abilities to grow, learn, adapt and problem solve. For facilitators, emulating this to the group permits it to take place, allowing for the participants to be open to explore and work together. As facilitator I would help prepare materials or make art alongside participants, diminishing hierarchical roles. Artmaking alongside the artists was done to emphasize the change in power, and to encourage the artists to keep interacting with one another and taking autonomy in the group.

After the art show, journaling included many of the positive remarks that I was given that then could be shared with the artists themselves. The practice of writing everything down was beneficial so that I could remember aspects of the show, and so that I could convey the messages

to the artists. I also used journaling to see what could be done differently the next time, I run this program.

Results

The art show, “A Touch of Sweetness,” took place a week after the group concluded. The art show was hosted at a local candy store. The store employs adults with intellectual disabilities including some of the group participants. The theme of the show was decided in collaboration with participants with consideration for the location at a candy store. The gallery’s role was a place to exhibit work and display the journey of individuals within the community. Bringing the art that was made during Unified Co-Op Art and displaying it for the greater community to view, let the participants feel visible and share their stories for a wider audience in a safe and controlled way. The show enabled participants to take pride in themselves, their abilities, talents, traits, and relationships, all while elevating the art group to a more professional status, emphasizing the theme of empowerment. The art gallery exemplified the themes and messages of the art it is representing. The participants shared invitations and helped created décor for the show so that they were included in decision making about where and how their work was displayed.

All participants attended the art show. Many of the adolescents stayed for the entirety of it, two hours, while others only stayed for a portion of time. Because the art show was open to the public, the environment had excess sensory input, and could be more overstimulating than the art making environment. This overabundance of sensory stimuli could affect the artists and visitors as art shows and witnessing art is a personal and internal experience.

The group’s community not only worked to help empower each other, but encouraged each other to share their stories and what makes them different, starting a conversation with the outside community, and letting others view and listen to participants. The participants were

shown they had a voice they could use. They found a new mode of communication through their work. The art gallery was a place to start dialogues with others, allowing for experiences to become visible and for the artwork to serve as facilitators to conversation (Delucia, 2016). Art shows and galleries are more than places to house art, they help raise public awareness, and “celebratory art openings... can validate and legitimize the artworks of [participants] by bringing it into the broader art community” (Delucia, 2016 p. 8). A community engagement art show allowed the artists to continue to be empowered by their work. The show allowed participants to see their worth and ability to communicate their needs, experiences, and ideas in a new visual way. They were able to take pride in their work and encouraged to do so. Community members continuously stated how great the work was. Community members who attended the art show were able to see the group artmaking process in a video of images taken over the 6-week art session.

Participant’s artistic identities were viewed through the showcasing of their work. They were viewed as members of their community instead of viewed by their diagnosis. Participants started to explore their individual, group, and artistic identities. In displaying their work, they allow community members to become witnesses of the art and the journeys and stories that are depicted. The art stimulated dialogue between the artists and community. Artists were seen describing their work and identifying their favorite parts to viewers. They were able to gain social skill practice while they discussed what they made. Social relationships can be seen with the constructs of the group — the participants with and without disabilities — and within the larger community engagement piece of the art show (Potash, Ho & Ho, 2018). The art show became a space for art to support the creator, their stories, and the dialogues associated with the work. Each participant was empowered. Parents and artists asked to continue the art group, wanting to strengthen the community created in the Unified Co-Op Art Group.

Artists participated in planning, including setting the gallery, inviting friends and family, and preparing the work for the art show. Participants were able to show themselves and their community their strengths and abilities. The artists were a central aspect of the art show, and including them in “the process of organizing... artwork for the gallery, making choices about pieces... to include, and telling a cohesive story, [can help participants] become more in touch with their identities in response to the diagnosis and beyond it” (Hartman, 2020, p. 211). The participants were given autonomy in the journey and decisions from start to finish.

The exhibition of art can be seen as a ritual which allows participants to be held by a supportive community in the act of witnessing. The space held for witnessing of art and stories invited dialogue and reflection from all involved. Delucia (2016) shared that “spaces of recollection are a way of constructing altars or memorials” (p. 10). This altar, the show, featured the artists and their work, giving viewers a look into who the artists were. Viewers saw the cooperation, collaboration, inclusion, and community building. The artwork displayed by each participant highlighted capabilities instead of a diagnoses or ‘inabilities.’ The art show aimed to validate the participants, and this was observed at the show. Participants were seen receiving and accepting compliments about the artwork that was displayed. Each participant was able to witness their art being looked at and experienced. Participants, their families, and the community were seen interacting, in conversation, and witnessing. Participants started to interact with others on their own volition. They wanted to show others their work and enjoyed the ability to share their work. Since the closing of the art show, another Unified Co-Op Art group started, and every artist from the first installation of the group attended the new group, along with new students wanting to express themselves and create art alongside others.

Discussion

The basis of Unified Co-Op art helped formulate clear reasoning, in conjunction with previous research, for the pairing of students and encouraging students to work together. It aided in starting to shine light on an inclusive model, which led to more student interactions, instead of separation of individuals with intellectual disabilities or the pairing with adult paraprofessionals.

In the group, individuals told their stories and perspectives while they explored different perspectives which encouraged safer and more comfortable social interactions (Potash, Ho & Ho, 2018). This belongingness could be seen in Unified Co-Op Art as it introduced individuals to others with differences and created a leveled and safe environment for these aspects to develop and take place.

Throughout the duration of the group and at the art show, examples of collaboration and group membership could be seen. Participants were able to evolve into artists who shared their stories and work alongside others to help promote community engagement, peer relations and empowerment (Cooper, et. al., 2013). Through the art making practice and mutual collaboration from every facet of the program, the participants were introduced to a new form of communication and given a platform on which to stand (Morris & Willis-Rauch, 2014).

The art show was an opportunity for participants to invite friends and family to bear witness to the pieces they had created. When the time came for the art to be catalysts for discussion, all the participants were able to share their experiences (Hartman, 2020). At the time of the show, the participants gave ‘tours’ of the gallery, explaining their art and methods to create it. First the participants shared their art with their invitees, but they also shared with community members who came to visit. Participants demonstrated the interactive project, the “Sweetness Project,” by taking a paper ‘candy’ out of the jar and reading the positive affirmation written on it. While the purpose of the art show was to display and share the artwork and capabilities of all the participants with the wider community, it also worked as a way for the

participants to become empowered by physically seeing others interacting and appreciating the work, they had created over the previous six weeks (Hartman, 2020).

Participants continuously made decisions on displaying their work in the art show. If the art was to be a part of the show, it would need to be stored and the participants would not be able to keep it until after the show concluded. Participants had to use self-control and cooperation to make this decision and work through the uncomfortable feeling that was present at times with not bringing the work home (Beaumont, 2012). Keeping the work somewhere rather than bringing it home created uncomfortable feelings, but the ability to showcase the work allowed the participants to be seen and validated, and thus these emotions were able to be regulated and overcome. Participants in the Unified Co-Op Art program were not only artists, but also witnesses to their peers' journeys, and witnesses to the community engagement art show that emphasized empowerment. Participants felt seen and heard, while taking pride in work that they had done. They were able to become autonomous in their process of sharing stories and creating a community outreach engagement show (Delucia, 2016).

The relationships that were created during the group continued to flourish during the show (Delucia, 2016). Group members worked together to set up their art and give tours to people who came to see the event. They worked diligently to keep the atmosphere open, engaging and collaborative, but also respectful to the group and the themes. These themes were continuously exemplified. Participants interacted and worked with their peers from the group, while also using the skills learned through making art to be able to interact and display and express themselves in real time at the show (Epp, 2008).

Using art therapy in collaboration with the theories and previous research, Unified Co-Op Art was able to bring a group of participants together, to interact in a safe environment, while sharing and communicating stories through a new mode of communication. Individuals were

empowered and shown the power of peer relations and community engagement, all while also practicing important social skills and identifying their individual and social identities.

References

- Alter-Muri, S. B. (2017). Art Education and Art Therapy Strategies for Autism Spectrum Disorder Students. *Art Education*, 70(5), 20–25. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/00043125.2017.1335536>
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- Beaumont, S. L. (2012). Art Therapy Approaches for Identity Problems during Adolescence. *Canadian Art Therapy Association Journal*, 25(1), 7–14. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/08322473.2012.11415557>
- Burdick, C., & Causton-Theoharis, J. (2012). Creating Effective Paraprofessional Support in the Inclusive Art Classroom. *Art Education*, 65(6), 33–37.
- Causton-Theoharis, J., & Malmgren, K. (2005). Building Bridges: Strategies to Help Paraprofessionals Promote Peer Interaction. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 37(6), 18–24.
- Chamberlain, M. (2020). Making Space Safe at Modern Art Oxford. *Art therapy in museums and galleries: Reframing Practice*, 26-39.
- Cooper, K., Smith, L. G. E., & Russell, A. (2017). Social identity, self-esteem, and mental health in autism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 47(7), 844–854. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1002/ejsp.2297>
- DeLucia, J. M. (2016). Art Therapy Services to Support Veterans' Transition to Civilian Life: The Studio and the Gallery. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 33(1), 4–12. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/07421656.2016.1127113>

Elkis-Abuhoff, D. L. (2008). Art therapy applied to an adolescent with Asperger's syndrome.

Arts in Psychotherapy, 35(4), 262–270. [https://doi-](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1016/j.aip.2008.06.007)

[org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1016/j.aip.2008.06.007](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1016/j.aip.2008.06.007)

Epp, K. M. (2008). Outcome-Based Evaluation of a Social Skills Program Using Art Therapy

and Group Therapy for Children on the Autism Spectrum. *Children & Schools*, 30(1),

27–36. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1093/cs/30.1.27>

Guay, D. M. (1995). The Sunny Side of the Street. A Supportive Community for the Inclusive

Art Classroom. *Art Education*, 48(3), 51–56. [https://doi-](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.2307/3193522)

[org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.2307/3193522](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.2307/3193522)

Hartman, A. (2020). Telling My Story in the Gallery: Art Therapy With Females on the Autism

Spectrum. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 37(4), 208–

212. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/07421656.2020.1824560>

Henley, D. (2000). Blessings in Disguise: Idiomatic Expression as a Stimulus in Group Art

Therapy with Children. *Art Therapy*, 17(4), 270–275. [https://doi-](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/07421656.2000.10129762)

[org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/07421656.2000.10129762](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/07421656.2000.10129762)

Holttum, S. (2020). Art Therapy in Museums. *Art therapy in museums and galleries: Reframing*

Practice, 26-39.

Huang, C., Su, H., Cheng, S., & Tan, C. (2021). The effects of group art therapy on adolescents'

self-concept and peer relationship: A mixed-method study. *New Directions for Child &*

Adolescent Development, 2021(179), 75–92. [https://doi-](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1002/cad.20435)

[org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1002/cad.20435](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1002/cad.20435)

Kleinert, H. L., Miracle, S. A., & Sheppard-Jones, K. (2007). Including Students With Moderate

and Severe Disabilities in Extracurricular and Community Recreation Activities.

Teaching Exceptional Children, 39(6), 33–38. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1177/004005990703900605>

McDonald, A., & Holttum, S. (2020). Primary-school-based art therapy: A mixed methods comparison study on children's classroom learning. *International Journal of Art Therapy: Inscape*, 25(3), 119–131. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/17454832.2020.1760906>

McNiff, S. (2011). Artistic expressions as primary modes of inquiry. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 39(5), 385–396. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/03069885.2011.621526>

Meekums, B. (2005). Creative writing as a tool for assessment: implications for embodied working. *Arts in Psychotherapy*, 32(2), 95–105. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1016/j.aip.2005.01.004>

Moon, B. L. (2016). *Creating Community. Art-based group therapy: theory and practice* (Second edition.). Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, Ltd.

Moon, B. L. (2016). The Empowering Quality of Making Art with Others. *Art-based group therapy: theory and practice* (Second ed.). Charles C. Thomas, Publisher, Ltd.

Morris, F., & Willis-Rauch, M. (2014). Join the Art Club: Exploring Social Empowerment in Art Therapy. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 31(1), 28–36. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/07421656.2014.873694>

Moula, Z., Powell, J., & Karkou, V. (2022). Qualitative and Arts-Based Evidence from Children Participating in a Pilot Randomised Controlled Study of School-Based Arts Therapies. *Children*, 9(890), 890. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.3390/children9060890>

Potash, J. S., Ho, R. T. H., & Ho, A. H. Y. (2018). Citizenship, Compassion, the Arts: People Living with Mental Illness Need a Caring Community. *Social Change*, 48(2), 238–259.

<https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1177/0049085718768911>

Schweizer, C., Knorth, E. J., van Yperen, T. A., & Spreen, M. (2020). Evaluation of “Images of Self,” an art therapy program for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). *Children and Youth Services Review*, 116. [https://doi-](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105207)

[org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105207](https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105207)

Van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.

Appendix A

Project Write Ups

Project 1: About Me Collage

Materials: Bristol paper, paint markers, Crayola markers, magazines, glue, scissors

Participants were invited to create a multimedia collage poster about themselves. The goal of the poster was to show their peers who they were, what they liked, and anything else they wanted to share. The materials were always available to the students, so they were able to choose what and how they represented themselves.

Project 2: "Feel the Beat" (drawing to music)

Materials: tempura sticks, card stock, music of various genres

Participants were invited to listen to songs and draw whatever they felt. Songs included upbeat songs, jazz, and instrumentals; the artists were also asked to provide some song recommendations.

Project 3: Round Robin Keith Haring Mura;

Materials: Butcher paper (cut into Keith Haring figures), tempura sticks, chalk pastels, oil pastels, crayons

Every participant started with a figure to decorate. and was allotted 5 minutes to decorate their figure. At the end of the time, the paper figures were passed clockwise. The timer would then begin, and the participants would add on to the figures. At the end of the round robin, each of the figures had been decorated by all the participants.

Project 4: Collaborative Zentangle

Materials: large piece of gessoed canvas, Sharpie paint marker

Participants practiced drawing a zentangle, an image made up of repeating lines and shapes, on their own. At different points of the six weeks, the participants were invited to create a zentangle on a large canvas using a paint Sharpie. Each of the participants had their own section on the canvas. At the end of the process, we were left with a large "quilt" of the students' zentangle creations.

Project 5: Collaborative Painting

Materials: butcher paper, acrylic paint (various colors), household cleaning tools (sponges, mop heads, various brushes, back scratchers) paint brushes

On a large sheet of butcher paper, students were invited to explore different tools to create a painting at the same time as their peers. During the first 20 minutes the participants used household cleaning tools that may not be the typical painting utensils. During the final 20 minutes, the students were invited to use the more typical paint brushes and foam brushes. The participants were able to move around and walk to different parts of the painting, collaborating and problem solving with one another, and exploring the medium of paint in a playful way.

Project 6: Our Hive

Materials: wooden hexagon, acrylic paint (various colors), paint markers

The participants, facilitators, buddies, and parents were all invited to decorate their hexagon any way that they wanted. Each hexagon is a representation of each person. All the hexagons were then attached to create a hive.

Project 7: The Sweetness Project

Materials: candy jars acrylic paint candy print outs drawing materials: colored pencils, markers, crayons

Participants decorated their own candy jars. They also decorated candy print outs that were then cut and laminated to be placed in the jars. The candies have positive affirmations, so art show attendees and others are encouraged to take a candy out of one or all the jars, interacting with each artists' creation. They can then save their affirmation for a time where they may need to read it again, or to share it with someone that may need a little "sweetness"

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA

Student's Name: Gianna Krovocheck

Type of Project: **Thesis**

Unified Co-Op Art: Empowerment and Collaboration through Group
Title: Art Therapy and a Community Engagement Art Show

Date of Graduation: September 1st 2023

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Lee Ann Thill

Lee Ann Thill, PhD, ATR-BC, LPAT, LPC